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homemakers' chat
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SUBJECT: "WEEDS AND WATER." Information from plant scientists of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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More conversation today for victory gardeners. More notes on growing vegetables for vim, vitality, vitamins and all the other V's. Whether you have just a pint-size plot or a generous acre of vegetables for the family, you have two most important matters to consider this month--weeds and water.

There's an old saying--maybe you remember it--that "a good hoeing is worth as much as a shower." You see, a light shower often just packs the soil leaving a hard dry crust over the ground without helping to moisten the soil underneath where the roots of your vegetables need it. Even a heavy shower does little good if most of the rain runs off. But "a good hoeing" keeps down weeds. Weeds draw heavily on the moisture in the soil. So the fewer the weeds, the more moisture saved for the crops.

Garden experts advise frequent hoeing or shallow cultivating. There's another old saying on the subject--"Tickle the ground with the hoe, and you will make it laugh with harvest." In other words, cultivating is one secret of good crops.

The ideal time to get out your hoe is after a rain when the soil has dried enough to work easily. Don't try to hoe or cultivate while the soil is so wet it's sticky. Wait a bit--maybe overnight--until it's just right to loosen easily with the hoe or cultivator. Break up the crust the rain has formed before the crust has time to bake hard. Weeds perk up after a rain, so that's the time to head them off.

One point to remember is not to hoe or cultivate too deeply because you may injure the vegetable roots that grow near the surface of the ground.

Gardeners often ask just how often to hoe or cultivate. It depends on the weeds and the weather. In general, once a week is not too often to keep weeds down, especially early in the season. If you cultivate frequently the job is never as hard as if you let it go until the ground packs hard, and the weeds grow thick.

Whether it pays to water your garden or leave it to rainfall depends on where you live and on your water supply. Of course, in the dry parts of the country, irrigation is necessary. Garden experts remind irrigation gardeners to wait until the garden needs water and then give the soil a thorough soaking followed by light cultivating when the ground is ready. They caution that constant water or too much water is actually harmful to the garden.

In parts of the country that have rainfall during the growing season, watering can be a great help to bringing crops on early. But if you have no running water, or if the garden is at a distance so that you have to carry pails of water a long way, then you'll be wise to water only the very tender crops, or plants you have just set out.

If you have water pressure and a hose, you can help your garden a great deal by the right kind of watering. But the wrong kind may harm your vegetables. The wrong kind is frequent light sprinkling. Frequent light sprinkling forms a crust over the garden soil. It makes the vegetables grow shallow instead of deep roots. And it may encourage certain vegetable diseases.

The right kind of watering is soaking the soil to a depth of 4 or 5 inches about once a week. A good time to water is in the evening. That gives the vegetables all night to enjoy their cool drink before the heat of the day comes on; and it saves leaves from the burning that comes from sun shining through drops of

water. A good method of applying the water is to open slight furrows along beside the rows of plants and allow the water to flow gently along these furrows. After the water has all soaked into the soil, you can cover the furrows with dry soil. This will keep a crust from forming. And the dry soil will absorb the moisture from underneath as a wick draws up oil.

What if you have no convenient water supply for the garden? Then do what you can to save all possible moisture in the soil. Keep down weeds. Keep the ground well cultivated ready to take in rain. Have plenty of humus in the soil to help hold moisture. And use mulch where you can--straw, or leaf mulch, lawn clippings or peat moss. Have the mulch 2 or 3 inches deep and spread it over a space at least 3 feet in diameter around plants. Mulch not only holds in moisture and keeps the ground cool as the weather gets hot. It also helps to keep down weeds.

Now just a couple more tips about weeds. Weeds are the thieves of the garden. They not only steal the moisture and nourishment from the soil which your crops need. They also harbor disease and insect pests. Weeds have caused many a beginner at gardening to give up in despair. Yet if you give your garden a once-a-week cultivation beginning as early as the weeds show themselves, you won't find weeds a great problem. They'll never get a chance to be. But watch those weeds that take root again quickly after you've cut them off with a hoe or cultivator. They have to be carried way out of the garden, or you'll have to deal with them again and again.

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